Hapan Knight of Ultimate Stamina

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Ania Solo considered herself a simple person. Unlike her cousins, her siblings, her aunts and uncles and grandparents and grandaunts and uncles, she did not rule a single system, command armies, or spend the better part of her young life training to kill people. Not that she had anything against the royal side of her family, or the Jedi side, or the Sithy side, or the political side, or the military side, but she liked her life simple.

Unfortunately for her, even if the Force had skipped her over, having the last name of 'Solo' kind of precluded her from anything simple. Sure she owned a junkyard at the tender age of fifteen, and was protected from unscrupulous characters by her trusty sidekick, an antiquated assassin droid that went by the designation AG-37. It was a good thing she had backup too, because for some reason, bad guys always thought that the least Force-sensitive Solo in the galaxy would make a prime target.

But at the moment, would-be murderers and bad guys with delusions of grandeur were far from Ania's mind. Holding the case to the Holovid her cousin had picked out, she seriously wondered how they could be related if their tastes were so different. It wasn't that she was against a good romance vid during 'Girls Night', but the Hapans had a very unique take on what made a romance vid. It also didn't help that the vid, according to the cover—which showed a shirtless muscular Jedi and two scantily clad women on either side of him—claimed to be 'based on real life events' that occurred over a hundred years ago. From what little she knew of the movie, despite it being an apparent 'classic' in the Consortium, she sincerely hoped that the movie was more fact than fiction.

"The Hapan Knight of Ultimate Stamina?" Princess Marasiah Fel, heir-apparent to the Fel Empire and oldest in the room, raised a thin eyebrow at the title.

"It explains the origins of the legendary *Jedi'doro*, the Royal Commando's Force Guard division," Crown Princess of the Hapan Consortium, Lilia Grace Chume Djo said eagerly, gray eyes bright with excitement. She was definitely unique among Hapan Royalty. An assassination attempt on her mother when she was still in the womb had resulted in Lilia being born without any legs. Despite that, she was still more than determined to be a Queen Mother who would continue the legacy started by Tenel Ka Djo. With Hapes being Hapes, Lilia Grace's uniqueness was idolized instead of shunned. And following the Hapan custom of emulating the Royal Family, it was now considered an

honor if your child was born with a disfiguring birth-defect. "It won several awards when it came out ten years ago. I practically grew up with all the hype and merchandising."
"It's a *very* dramatized version of events, *Chume'da* Lilia," her personal protector and close friend Corporal Zara Zel said wryly. Her jet-black hair and pale skin put in her stark contrast with the wild crimson hair and bronze skin of Lilia. Both had the trademark piercing gray eyes that denoted their royal lineage, though. "It made Jedi Master Zekk look like a sex god at best, a boy-toy at worst."
"And we're going to watch this?" Ania said skeptically, tossing the movie case over to another one of her cousins.
"I know," Alema Solo agreed, waving the cover at the Crown Princess of Hapes. Despite her innocuous name, Alema Solo was the name she used when she was among family. Her true title was Sith Saber Alema Ren. Her geometric tattoos and dark-side yellowed eyes just made her stand out in general as she lounged back in the plush chair in the standard black garb of the Order of Ren. Blonde hair and natural piercing blue eyes, she was literally the poster-child for the eugenic-minded, xenophobic Order dedicated to using the dark side for good.
"With a name like Hapan Knight of Ultimate Stamina, it sounds like…"
"I know what it sounds like," Lilia sighed at her uncultured relatives. Apparently there was something that happened as you became an adult that made people so unreasonable. She hoped that when she got to their ages in five or so years she wouldn't be so obstinate. "And it's a lot better than Zar and the title made it out to be. The battle scenes in it are *so* romantic."
"Right," Ania said blankly, again wondering if it was something in the Transitory Mist that made Hapans so odd.
"It has to be a little good at least. I hear this is the first in a trilogy of movies?" Ever in-the-know Marasiah Fel said mildly.
"Correct, your Highness," Lilia grinned. "Knight of Ultimate Stamina had a sequel three years later. Knight of Ultimate Body-Heat, based on the events during the Battle for Ilum in the Swarm War. And three years after that, Knight of Ultimate Sacrifice, of course about Jedi Master Zekk Zel's life during the Legacy Wars. There's even talk that the director is going to make a prequel trilogy about the origins of Master Zekk Zel and his relationship with the Royal Zel twins of his era."
"His era," Tyria Zel stressed, standing next to her twin Zara. She held out a hand and the movie case floated across the room and into it. "It's weird enough to see great-grandpa portrayed by an actor that barely looks like him. Great-Grandma Zel has to be rolling in her grave."

"At least they filmed on location and kept the computer-effects to a minimum," Zara nodded. "Even got one of the local Killik hives to help out and provide realism."
"So how accurate is this?" Anika Skywalker, the younger half-sister of Cade Skywalker, frowned. Seated on the floor and hugging a giant, nerf-shaped pillow to her, Anika Skywalker was dressed in traditional Jedi robes and was practically Alema's opposite in every way. The younger of the two Force-sensitives had curly dark brown hair and soft brown eyes, and radiated light like Alema radiated dark.
"Probably not very," Ania answered the younger girl. "It's just 'based on real events' after all."
"The movie's creators used several historical source materials as well as the book series about Lady Taryn Zel and Zekk Zel's life," Marasiah answered.
"That series isn't historical?" Anika blinked, tilting her head questioningly.
"Written by Colonel Chiri Aros," Marasiah clarified. "She's well known in historical circles to…"
"Watch it, Lady Fel," one of the guards from House Aros, Lieutenant Gemma Aros, warned.
"Embellish…" Marasiah chose diplomatically. "Accounts of that time. Makes for good reading, and evidently good movies though."
Bouncing in her seat, Lilia grinned at the others as Tyria dimmed the lights in the room. "Okay, shush everyone, she's started the movie. Trust me, you are going to love this."
Ania just rolled her eyes, but didn't say anything as she settled into the alien comfort of a comfy couch and watched as the movie began to play.
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It was a turbulent era!
Chaos and despair ravaged the galaxy,
Not even the safety of the Consortium was sacred as invaders from outside
the galaxy infiltrated the very halls of the Fountain Palace and threatened
the stability of a Royal Family which had ruled for many hundreds of years.
Out in the fields of Zadaria the wicked Killik invaders waged war in an attempt to
enslave the planet and bring ruin to the Warrior Queen Mother Tenel Ka Chume Djo.

The only thing who stands in the path of millions of murderous insects is the brave
Hapan force of a few thousand strong led by the daring Chume'da Taryn and Trista Zel
and their personal Jedi manservant Jedi Knight Zekk. Against all odds, and with
everything on the line, they stood their ground as the unstoppable onslaught barreled
towards them. And as others looked to them, they changed the course of not just the war,
but of the history of Hapes itself.
Watch now, how the heroes of old handled anything that dare threaten Hapes

The *Dragon Queen* streamed through the stars above the rain-soaked planet of Zadaria, its impressive twin-disc profile a dark shadow against the bright blue and green of the world below. Suddenly, its twin saucers lit up in a torrent of red as its rapid-fire turbolaser guns opened fire in a barrage that would have cowed anyone. Anyone but the foe now chasing it. Streaming across the void of space in dogged pursuit looked to be an unending wave of Killik vessels, charging recklessly into the fire the *Dragon Queen* was laying out. A line of explosions rippled through the Killik ranks, but still they came.

The view shifted, weaving through the countless firefights occurring in space to the beleaguered forces on the ground.

"Get down!" Hapan Alpha Squad Captain Moreem Espara yelled over the din. A whistling sound and a second later an artillery shell erupted in a blinding flash, sending fragments of metal and clods of dirt flying everywhere. All around the Hapan forces were blasting at the incoming wave of Killiks, regardless of how futile the task seemed. Rain pounded down heavily, soaking the ground and turning the once pristine vineyard into a boggy swamp.

"You wants some of this? You want some too? Here, have some!" Corporal Chiri Aros yelled in challenge, the barrels of her rotary cannon glowing red and steaming in the heavy rainfall as it screamed out blaster bolt by the bucketful into the incoming onslaught.

The gun jammed and she threw it aside in favor of a heavy assault rifle, her face lighting up the grim determination as she unleashed several hundred rounds a minute. When that ran out of ammo, she switched to a plasma carbine. A Killik spear flew through the air and she used her carbine to bat it aside, but in doing so ruined the weapon. She threw it to the side, and with a snarl, pulled the scattergun strapped to the small of her back out and emptied its clip into several

charging bipedal bugs. The rounds blew the creatures away, but others quickly filled up the hole in their ranks. With no time to reload, Chiri threw the gun at the approaching bugs and drew two large, heavy-blasters. Their familiar shrieking was heard over the din as arm-sized laser-bolts roared out of her twin hand-cannons. A nearby explosion pitched Chiri backwards, and she lost her grip on both guns. With an annoyed huff, she freed two more guns from her utility belt and scrambled to her feet to rejoin the battle. Even then, there were still more bugs than she had ammunition.

Out of ammo, Chiri pulled out a vibrosword and stared down the approaching horde with a resigned smirk. "Who wants to live forever anyways."

"This isn't good, we can't hold!"

"I'm out! Pass me another mag!" Lieutenant Nyrani Lovett announced urgently.

"Where's the general?" Sergeant Hiana Roh asked, swinging her sniper rifle like a club as the Killiks closed in.

Moreem began gesturing to a part of the battlefield. "She's over…" An explosion blossomed outwards from the direction she was gesturing. "There…Just great. This is Captain Espara all units fall baaaah!"

A spider-like Killik leaped out from nowhere and landed on her leg, dragging her down to the ground. Even as it began to chew and gnaw on it, Moreem jammed her blaster pistol into its head and fired repeatedly.

"Captain!" Chiri called out, but another explosion lifted her off her feet and bounced her painfully across a nearby boulder, leaving her seeing double.

The line of Hapan soldiers was rapidly collapsing in on itself as the Killik horde pressed onwards. Everywhere, Hapan soldiers were dying in gruesome ways, the air filled with the spear-like weapons and primitive projectiles the Killiks were using.

Hiana Roh let out a cry as a staff slapped across her stomach, doubling her over. The Killik warrior raised his weapon to deliver the finishing blow, but then promptly lost his head as a spinning red blade sliced through the air, through the very raindrops, on its way through its neck. Dazed, Hiana weakly lifted her head to trace the spinning blade back to its owner.

From out of the smoke and heavy rain, the signature royal red blade of the founder of the Force Guard fell neatly back into the hand of Jedi Knight Zekk. Even with projectiles flying every which way, Zekk and the two figures flanking him strode through the battlefield in seemingly slow motion, their cloaks flaring behind them. Explosions flared all

around them, the punishing rain coming down in sheets, yet nothing seemed capable of hitting them. Clad in gleaming electrum and chrome armor that reflected the light of the Zekk's blade so that it looked as if they were wearing molten metal, Taryn and Trista Zel both held a blaster in each hand. Zekk himself was in standard Jedi robes, his face a mask of determination as he strode purposefully through the heated battle.

"Wonderknight," Chiri croaked, reaching a hand up in his direction.

As if time righted itself, Zekk and the two with him burst into action, their cloaks flying away in the breeze of another explosion. Taryn and Trista put their dual-wielding styles to use, their plasma pistols barking out a repeated litany of deadly superheated metal. Nothing that was in their path survived as the two systematically mowed down the entire front line of the Killik warriors. Projectiles and spears were sent their way, but Zekk held out his hand and blasted the attack aside with a judicious use of Force energy. A larger Killik warrior leaped through the air and landed in front of Zekk, staff weapon lashing out. Zekk knocked it aside and then slashed off the warrior's legs. Without even looking back, Zekk pressed onwards. The Killik raised its weapon again, but suddenly had four plasma pistols pressed into the back of its head. Before it realized what was happening, the guns discharged and sprayed Killik brain across the soggy battlefield.

The three-person offensive seemed to halt the entire Killik charge, giving the Hapans time to regroup. Silence reigned for several long minutes, the bugs retreating back into the cave they had come from in abject shock. In the meantime, Zekk stood over the injured Chiri and Moreem and gave them a professional nod.

"On your feet, soldiers. This battle is not over yet." He jerked his head to the side to allow a Killik spear to fly past. The thrower was promptly punished for his gall by Taryn and Trista's life-ending barrage. But that attack signaled a renewal of the Killik charge as a whole host of them began rushing out of the cave again.

"To me!" Taryn Zel yelled out, rallying the soldiers around her. "To me! For Hapes!"

The Hapans let out a defiant yell and surged forward around the Royal Family commander, their fire intensifying as they refused to give another inch. Zekk was at the forefront of the battle, his saber flashing repeatedly as he fended off multiple enemies at one time.

An ear-splitting roar gave the Hapans pause, however, and a massive beetle emerged from the Killik ranks to stand at the front of the cave.

"We don't have the firepower to take that down," a Hapan soldier said in dread.

"Yes we do," Trista said evenly. "It's called a Jedi, and he has the Force with him."
As she spoke, Zekk—his robes shredded by near-misses, claws, and sharp pointy things—shrugged off the top of his robes so that they hung at his waist. He stepped forward, looking impossibly tiny against the Killik behemoth before him.
"You may conquer the land; you may slaughter the people. But that is not the end. We will rise again." Zekk said with lethal calmness, rain dripping from his chiseled features as he stood with his lightsaber held out at his side. His head jerked upwards to stare the beast down, wild dark hair spraying an arc of raindrops in the process. "Beast, you will go no further."
The Kolosolok roared again and its scythe-like tusks sliced through the air where the Jedi had been. Zekk had deftly leaped into the air and landed on one of said tusk, using the Force to keep his balance. The creature's head rose up, its beady eye staring at Zekk in complete shock.
"As a Jedi Knight of the Order, it is my duty to give you one last chance to withdraw," Zekk said evenly. "The consequences for not doing so will be dire."
The creature shook its head again, intent on flicking the Jedi off. Zekk launched himself into the air high above the battlefield. His body arched gracefully in a backwards flip and he landed on the Kolosolok's back. The creature never had a chance as he delivered a precision blow to the top of the creature's head. It emitted one last strangled sound before dropping to the ground with a thunderous bang. Its mass blocked the cave the Killiks had come from, giving the Hapans relief once more.
Zekk hopped off the body, and slung the tattered remains of his upper Jedi robe over his shoulder as he acknowledged the Hapan twins.
"Ladies Taryn, Trista Zel, I would recommend we withdraw now. Our forces are exhausted and we need a new plan of attack."
"Excellent advice," Trista nodded. She glanced to the other Hapans. "Sound the retreat. Fall back to base-camp while the Killiks are holed up."
"*Chume'da*," the nearest Hapan soldier saluted and ran off to spread the word.
"Great job, Jedi Knight Zekk," Taryn said with a confident grin, stepping over to claim a smoldering kiss. "I knew House Zel could rely on you."
"I live to serve, Lady Zel," Zekk inclined his head. "Come, let us get out of the rain and warmed up. I am sure there will be more fighting to come."

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"Come, let us get out of the rain and warmed up. I am sure there will be more fighting to come."

Ania let out a groan, her head dropping forward. "Someone shoot me."

"Shhhhhh!" Every Hapan in the room, which included her cousin Lilia and her cadre of protectors, hissed at Ania.

"Seriously?" Ania gestured to the movie. "The action scenes are great and the special effects are amazing, but the dialogue is awful."

"Trying to warn a Kolosolok?" Alema Solo giggled with a nod. "If this is how stupid Jedi were back then, I'm surprised that my baby brothers still chose to be Jedi. Heck, it's a surprise the Jedi back then even survived. "

"Would you two shut up," Lilia said in disbelief. "You're missing the shower scene! It was said to be taken directly from the autobiography that Colonel Chiri Aros wrote when she retired!"

"I read that book," Marasiah said wryly. "It read more like a steamy romance novel than historical account."

"I don't want to know," Ania groaned, holding her head.

"Jedi Knight Zekk, I have to admit that I was a little jealous when you kissed my sister aboard the Dragon Queen."

"*There's no need to be jealous, Lady Trista Zel. My feelings for you are strong as well*."

"*It's okay sister, I just want you to be happy. He's not mine, but* ***House Zel****'s personal Jedi. If he does not object, I am willing to share him. I will not stand in the way of love.*"

Ania heard collective sighs rise up from the Hapan audience and exchanged bewildered glances with Alema. She wondered if the fact that the only other one who didn't think this movie as a work of art was a card-carrying Sith Lady in training, if her sanity was in question.

At the same time, Ania couldn't help but look away and smile slightly. Despite all the turbulence the galaxy could throw, it was times like this, with some of her closest friends and family that she appreciated the most. Regardless of their poor taste in movie choices.

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Zekk woke to the steady rainfall outside, far from cold as he held the royal ladies of Zel on either side of him. The tent flap opened, and Corporal Chiri Aros entered, smiling knowingly at the two women in his bed as if she had predicted the outcome long before it had happened.

"Ladies Zel, Jedi Knight Zekk, forgive the interruption, but a tactical meeting is being held to plan the next advance."

"Thank you, corporal," Zekk acknowledged, extracting himself from between the twins and walking to his gear on a nearby chair.

"You were able to keep up with the both of them the entire night?" Chiri's eyebrows rose at the unclothed state of both Zels and their satisfied expressions.
"I would be a poor Knight of House Zel if I was unable to rise to the challenge," Zekk answered smoothly, pulling on his pants. "The Force provides many benefits to a trained Jedi."
"*Many* benefits," Taryn confirmed with a grin as she and her sister dressed.
Chiri's eyes were slightly glassy as she watched Zekk dress, and she nodded mutely, licking her lips. "It's a good thing then…" she exhaled slowly. "That both Roh and myself incurred a major debt to your Jedi when he saved our lives..."
"And we'd hardly want it known that House Roh and Aros didn't pay their debts," Taryn said with an understanding nod.
"Sister, if we let them do this, I can foresee a whole army putting themselves in harm's way so that Jedi Knight Zekk might save them."
"We can make it exclusively to Alpha Squad," Taryn said brightly. "They protect us to, so we can give back."
"You are the best *chume'da* ever, Lady Zel," Chiri beamed.
"Wait a minute, that never happened!" Anika protested. "I studied the lives of Jedi Master Zekk and the others at the Praxeum. There's no way that Taryn Zel would…would…put him out for stud like that."
"Shhhh!" The Hapans hissed at the innocent-looking Jedi girl.
"You don't know Great-Grandma," Zara said dryly. "It's common knowledge that Jedi Zekk fathered Lady Trista Zel's only child. And Taryn Zel really cared deeply for her squadmates. If Jedi Zekk agreed to it, I wouldn't put it past her to do something like that. Colonel Aros wrote those scenes in her autobiography for a reason you know."
"Didn't her book also say that some events might be exaggerated or distorted from the passage of time?" Marasiah asked with a small smile.
"Look, are we watching this or not?" Lilia said in exasperation.
"Sorry," Anika meeped.
Zekk entered the command tent, Chiri, Hiana, Taryn, and Trista flanking him.
"Jedi Knight Zekk," Sneered Hapan Colonel Zian Rais at the head of the holotable inside. "There is no reason you should be here."
"He is our House Jedi, sir," Taryn said stiffly.
"Jedi, what good are those?" Colonel Rais scoffed, shaking her head. "Don't try to impress me with his sorcerer's ways, Corporal Zel. His sad devotion to that ancient religion did not help save the lives of General

Arrines and the hundreds of Hapans who fell today, or given him clairvoyance enough to see the ambush the Killiks had set for…"
The colonel was cut off by an upper-cut delivered by Trista Zel, shocking all those in the room. "Colonel, our forces followed the plans General Arrines and *yourself* laid out. Jedi Knight Zekk cautioned you against it. My sister agreed with his assessment. The Queen Mother made him general of her armies for a reason, but the two of you insisted and overruled him because of his gender. You might be our commanding officers in the field, but you will *not* try to pin your failures on Jedi Knight Zekk. Otherwise you'll find just how much of the Royal Family's power my sister and I can wield."
Trista's action was followed by the two majors flanking the colonel drawing their side-arms, and those of Alpha Squad drawing theirs.
"Enough," Zekk said firmly, stepping between the two sides. "We're on the same side. Let's focus on the Killiks and not each other. I might not be Hapan, but unless we all work as a team, those Killiks will overwhelm us without a thought. Remember what General Arrines said. 'We must meet this threat with our courage, our valor, indeed our very lives to ensure that Hapan civilization, not Killik, dominates the Consortium, *now and always.*' So lets show these bugs what the Hapans are capable of but in a way that keeps our people living."
"He's right," Lieutenant Lilan Irina said evenly, holstering her weapon. "Every advance we have made has killed many Killiks, but we have also suffered heavy casualties as well. And we are no closer to their nests than we were when this campaign started. In a war of attrition, the Killiks would most definitely win."
"The main problem is, we don't know where their nests are," Lieutenant Kiali Beyele spoke up. "And we learned early on that the Killiks can track our troop movements through our comm usage. It's how they managed to kill most of the senior staff from the beginning."
"A scouting force is needed then," Colonel Rais wiped the cut on her lip as she stood. "To ascertain the location of the Killiks and give us a target we can hit from orbit."
"Alpha Squad can do it," Moreem Espara volunteered.
"Deep in enemy territory, you won't have any support should something go wrong." Major Salis of SigTel warned.
"We're Alpha Squad," Moreem nodded. "It's what *we* do."
"Jedi Knight Zekk, stay here and continue to coordinate our holding actions," Taryn Zel ordered. "We need someone we can trust to watch over our forces while we try to give them something to shoot at."

"As you command," Zekk bowed his head. "Stay safe, Ladies Zel. After searching this galaxy for a place to belong, I have grown quite comfortable at Hapes."
"And we have grown comfortable with you," Trista said, stepping to him and giving him a slow kiss in front of the command staff.
"Very comfortable," Taryn gave him a smoldering kiss of her own. "Stay alive, Jedi Knight Zekk, We would be most displeased if you failed to do so."
"And you, Ladies Zel," Zekk whispered softly, watching them leave the tent with the rest of their squad. Had Zekk chose that moment to look at Colonel Rais and her officers, he would have seen them exchange meaningful glances at one and other. Glances that often meant Hapan intrigue at its finest was about to be played out.
Several hours later night had fallen and Alpha Squad had departed. Inside the command tent, however, three individuals were still present.
"It was done?" Colonel Rais asked softly.
"Yes, Colonel," Major Inola from the Security Services inclined her head. "I made sure that the maps carried by the daughters of Zel neglected to mention the Killik forces that were seen from orbital scans. It will take them at least a week before they realize that they've marched straight into strongest part of the Killik formation. By then it will be too late for them."
"Ni'Korish smiles upon you," Colonel Rais praised. Her expression hardened, the red glow from the holo-table casting her face in a sinister light. "Now, we just need to deal with the Jedi."
"He is a man, easily manipulated," Major Salis spoke. "Perhaps we can get the daughter of House Thane to seduce him. She is similar in appearance and demeanor as Taryn Zel, and can take advantage of his longing for them."
"A Jedi is not so easily fooled," Colonel Rais shook his head.
"Then we don't tell Ksia Thane," Major Inola spoke. "She is the daughter of the traitor Vianel Thane on the Heritage Council, she won't be missed if she dies. And knowing Jedi practices, he will feel obliged to give her another chance."
"You have a point," Colonel Rais agreed.
"I'll have her transferred to the division the Jedi commands," Major Inola said. "In the meantime, we need to shore up the defenses for when the Jedi's division gets overwhelmed. No sense leaving a gap in our lines and lose this war over one man."
Major Salis smiled evilly. "The naïve Queen Mother Tenel Ka Djo thought Ni'korish dead with the end of the rightful Queen Mother

Alyssa and Ta'a Chume before her. She could not have been more wrong."
Zekk awoke the next morning none-the-wiser of the plots in motion against him. Though the Zel twins weighed heavily on his mind, he also had several tens of thousands of soldiers to oversee and couldn't afford to mope about. He had just finished clipping his lightsaber to his belt when he felt someone approach the tent.
"Enter." He bent down to tightened the straps on his boots
"How…? Oh, right, you're a Jedi."
Zekk had to do a double-take as a red-haired Hapan soldier wearing the rank of lieutenant entered. "Ta…Sorry, you looked a lot like Taryn Zel."
"Thank you for the compliment, sir," the young woman smiled, snapping off a salute. Like Taryn, she was the same height and build, her red hair kept in formal Hapan braids. Unlike Taryn though, her eyes were bright green and she had a smattering of freckles across the bridge of her nose. "Lieutenant Ksia Thane reporting as ordered. Transferring from Recon Gamma, sir."
"I didn't order a transfer," Zekk said in confusion, slowly returning the salute. "At ease."
"Colonel Rais authorized it this morning, sir," Ksia answered, clasping her hands at the small of her back. "Said I was to act as your liaison between command and the forward positions. I am to be completely at your disposal until such time you see fit to be rid of me."
"Be rid of you?"
Ksia looked at Zekk carefully, her emotions clearly on her face. "Sir, my last name…Thane. I'm the *duch'da* for House Thane. As in a leading member of the Heritage Council and opposition of Queen Mother Tenel Ka Djo."
"So?" Zekk shrugged, sliding his comlink into the appropriate slot on his belt. "You're here right now, on the frontlines. Heck, aren't the recon-squads the second toughest group in the Hapan armed forces after the *chume'doro*? You get all sorts of assignments the regular units can't handle. Were right there with Tenel Ka during the Vong War."
Ksia looked away. "Not everyone sees it that way. They think I'm a spy for my mother."
"Lieutenant Thane," Zekk placed a hand on her shoulder. "One of my closest and most trusted friends is Sergeant Chiri Aros on Alpha Squad. And isn't her mom on the Heritage Council too?"
Ksia nodded mutely, a new hope growing in her eyes.

"And I trust her with my life. I trust her to keep Taryn and Trista safe," Zekk continued with a gentle smile. "I try not to judge people on their past, or who their family decides to hang out with. It'd be pretty hypocritical of me to do so considering where I come from."
"Sir," Ksia saluted sharply again.
Zekk nodded in support and gestured with his head. "We've got troops to inspect, Lieutenant Thane."
"Yes, sir," Ksia agreed, following him out of the tent.
"If you don't mind me asking, you look a little young to be a commissioned officer."
"Noble house, lots of credits, best officer school influence can get," Ksia said dryly. "It's why I immediately transferred into recon. I didn't want to get stuck behind a desk ordering troops from afar. Rank rarely matters in recon units, almost like the *chume'doro*. You get in on your own merit and if you aren't cut out for it if you buy your way in, you'll probably be dead on the first assignment."
"I don't know much about the recon squads," Zekk admitted. "I spend almost all my time with Alpha Squad."
"There are ten recon squads," Ksia perked up at a subject she obviously knew a lot about. "Half of them were given an ancient designation said to exist even before the Hapans made it through the Transitory Mists. The other half were later creations by one of the more militant Queen Mothers and have aurabesh designations."
"Is Alpha Squad recon then?" Zekk asked.
"Yes and no," Ksia said, taking a breath. "The original five recon squads were the basis of the *chume'doro*, a group meant to scout the Mists for any danger to the first leaders of Hapes. As history went on, the *chume'doro* became its own organization and the recon squads dropped their bodyguard duties and became more 'first-contact' type combat units. Insertions behind enemy lines, scouting, intel-gathering. Alpha Squad is the last remnant of that time, a throwback to honor the original protectors of our leaders. As you've probably seen, they have aspects of both intel-gathering and bodyguard duty."
Another person fell into step with them. "Jedi Knight Zekk."
"Major Salis," Zekk greeted politely.
"Going over the plans to locate the Killik nests, Colonel Rais felt it prudent to dispatch the other recon units as well. This will reduce the ground Alpha Squad has to cover and increase our chances of finding the nest in a timely manner. Every Killik push against our line drains us of more soldiers and equipment and we cannot hold out indefinitely."
"Good idea," Zekk agreed.

"Glad you think so," Major Salis said sarcastically. "We also decided that we can afford to push our lines up several dozen kilometers on the northern front. If the Killik hives are in that location, Alpha Squad will need all the support they can get in a timely manner. Here is the plan of attack we drew up. Take three companies and secure the ridge overlooking the fields here and here."
Zekk looked at the information. "Has the area been secured yet? I was under the impression that the reason why we hadn't advanced that far was because the Killiks had tunnels in the region."
"One of the reasons why we want three companies in the area," Salis continued. "If the Killiks *are* tunneling in the area, we have to stop them before they reach our front lines. The last thing we want is for them to burrow directly under our position."
"Makes sense," Zekk agreed. "I'll begin movement of our troops as soon as possible."
"See that you do, Jedi Knight Zekk. Lieutenant Thane, I see you found your new commanding officer. Good. See to it that anything he desires is done and protect him with your life. Since he is the acting general for the Queen Mother, we can ill-afford his loss."
"Yes, ma'am," Ksia saluted sharply.
"Get to it then, we have a war to win."

HKUS III HKUS

Ania saw the slight scowl on Zara and Tyria's face, and tilted her head towards them. "You two do know it's only a movie, right?"
"Not that," Tyria shook her head. "There was a big controversy at the time when the director chose to add the character Ksia Thane to the story. Some said that it set the men's-rights movement back several decades for portraying Zekk as someone who couldn't function without a female guiding him. It's one of the reasons why this movie failed the Vessau Test."
"The what?" Ania said blankly.
"Developed by men's rights' advocates for Hapan entertainment, named after one of Tenel Ka Chume Djo's first male officers." Zara took over. "A movie has to have at least two men in it who say more than five lines, and are able to act independent of a female's direction, for it to pass the test. Those five lines also can't be about trying to please one of the female characters, or about describing a female character."
"Right," Ania nodded just to be agreeable.
Tyria continued "At the same time, the director had to appeal to the main audience of the Consortium and thought that Great-Grandpa Zekk being the general of the Hapan forces at the time was a little unbelievable no matter how true."

Anika Skywalker looked up at that. "You mean there was no Ksia Thane back then?"
"That's part of the controversy," Marasiah said. "There *was* a Ksia Thane on Zadaria at the time, was part of Recon Gamma. But that's as far as the secondary and primary sources coincide. Most of Hapes doesn't believe that anything happened between Ksia and Zekk…."
"And *nothing* happened," Zara said stonily. "He wouldn't do that to Taryn."
"At the same time," Marasiah continued as if she hadn't been interrupted. "There are several sources that hint that during Taryn and Trista's scouting mission, Zekk had an affair…"
"He didn't," Tyria hissed.
"Had a steamy, sordid, juicy, passionate, affair," Marasiah rolled her eyes at the Hapans. "With Ksia."
"A story made by descendants of the Heritage Council to lay claim to his legacy," Zara spat.
"As you can see, it's kind of a heated topic even today," Marasiah finished, more than a few eyes glaring at her for even suggesting the story had a kernel of truth. "It doesn't help that Colonel Aros' memoirs say that most of the Hapan army on Zadaria at the time would have been more than willing to have his child after he took charge. Of course, the fact that Chiri Aros and Ksia Thane were childhood friends and went through Basic Training together might have also added to her embellishments. I read that the director and writers ultimately included her because there was enough circumstantial evidence to suggest that *something* had happened between Zekk and Ksia."
Ania snuck a sidelong glance at the movie and saw that the two individuals were seated atop a barricade overlooking a lush green valley. The sun was shining through the clouds at the moment, the sodden ground glowing brightly and twinkling in the light.
"*So, what's life as a Jedi like?"*
"It's really the only life I've ever known. We go around from one corner of the galaxy to another, righting wrongs, defending those with no voice. A Jedi's life is service to the Force, to its will. How about you, what's life as a Hapan noblewoman like?"
"Boring, tedious, full of politics that I'd rather have no part of. You can say one thing one day and have its meaning twisted around to be something else the next. It's why I left my homeworld to join up with the Royal Navy as soon as I could. I couldn't stand family politics."
"Sounds a lot like Taryn Zel."
"It does, doesn't it? Ha, if my mother heard that, she'd have an aneurism. I've actually never been out of the Transitory Mists before,

but I've heard stories. They say that the galaxy doesn't glow but is actually cold and dark?"
"Very true. The Transitory Mists are like a protective blanket for Hapes."
"Blanket or prison?"
"I'm sorry?"
"If my people were more involved in galactic politics, then we wouldn't be blindsided when Vong or Killiks invade. We'd be more prepared."
"And that's another reason why those that say she had an affair with Zekk have more weight," Marasiah pointed out. "After the Swarm War, Ksia Thane went on to become one of Tenel Ka Chume Djo's strongest supporters when it came to opening Hapes to the outside galaxy. As a member of a family that was a part of the Heritage Council, she and Chiri Aros managed to convince the Chell, Galney, and Gheer survivors to fall into step with their votes. The accounts of her post-war movements are far better recorded, and since Chiri Aros was her close friend and confidant, it was assumed that Ksia Thane relayed news of the affair to her for posterity's sake."
"It's also the reason why half my protectors hate the other half's guts," Lilia Grace Chume Djo said in exasperation, gesturing to her Zel-family bodyguards and the Aros-line. "We're never going to get through this movie if you all keep interrupting. As Chume'da I'm pulling rank and ordering all of you to shush!"
"I'm a Sith, I don't listen to royalty," Alema Solo sighed.
"I'm also royalty," Marasiah said, showing off the royal signet-ring on her finger.
"Don't even start," Lilia muttered to the others as they too opened their mouths to say something. She held up the remote and turned up the volume to the movie.
HKUS III HKUS
"Hey, I said that General Zekk wanted these moved out several hours ago, what's the hold up?" Ksia barked at a group of soldiers. Behind them were several crates full of various supplies.
The soldiers looked at her dismissively, the ever present Zadaria rainfall again coming down in buckets around them. A lieutenant, her dark hair tied back in a bun, stood. "Look, you might have fun being ordered about by a male, but not everyone in this navy will stoop so low. The daughter of a traitor, and now someone who bends over whenever 'General' Zekk barks? Please. Run along now and tell him our heavyloader broke down in the rain or something, Lieutenant *Thane*."

"The Queen Mother approved General Zekk's appointment," Ksia said, not backing down. "To defy General Zekk's orders is to defy her will. Should I bring you up on treason charges? After all, to defy a legitimate military order during wartime is just that."
The other soldiers stood, surrounding the red-haired lieutenant.
"It's because of the Queen Mother that we are on this drenched ball of mud dying for vineyards and mountains," the other lieutenant hissed.
"Is there a problem here?" Zekk asked smoothly, deviating from his path as he noticed the growing confrontation.
"No, *sir*," the lieutenant said derisively. "Just reminding *Lieutenant* Thane that as a First Lieutenant, I outrank her."
"And those cargo crates?" Zekk gestured with his head. "The portable turrets need to be moved over by that ridge to provide a defil…"
"With respect, Jedi Knight Zekk, I am aware of where they need to be. But we have advanced ten kilometers and there has been no sign of Killik activity for the past few days. Besides, I'm sure your vaunted Force will tell us if we're about to be attacked."
"Even then, I…" Zekk stopped, alarms throughout the base began to go off.
"Seismic sensors were tripped!" Ksia called out. "Battle-stations, everyone!"
No sooner had she spoke than several glowing projectiles lit up the cloudy sky. "Incoming artillery! Shields!"
Just in time, a powerful green dome surrounded the Hapan encampment and the mass of projectiles exploded in a firework-like display against its surface. The heavy barrage continued, and one of the shield operators looked to Zekk in fear.
"Shields at sixty-percent!"
"They'll hold," Zekk said grimly.
"Look!" One of the soldiers pointed to the field below the mesa. Below, the Hapans could see multiple eruptions of soaked dirt and grass all around them as burrowing Killiks ran headlong into the buried mines. But the mine detonations continued to occur at a worrisome rate. Especially when the Hapans realized that the Killiks had penetrated the last row of mines. There was something frightening about an enemy that would charge headlong through a field of death just to kill you. The only bright side was that the artillery bombardment had ended.
The Hapan soldiers eyed the ground around them with increasingly worried looks, some panting heavily as they aimed their rifles at the soil. And then the Killiks launched their attacks, popping out of holes and dragging hapless soldiers underground with them. Several more

holes appeared and swarms of beetle-like creatures popped out and consumed those closest to them, muffled screams ending as the beetles poured into their opened mouths.
As disciplined as the Hapans were, the visceral close-combat situation would have tested anyone's nerves. Turrets opened fire, only to have the ground beneath them sapped out. The entire mesa appeared to roll like a living wave as the Killiks pressed their attack from below.
Zekk's lightsaber was in constant action, slicing through the raindrops with pinpoint accuracy to down an entire swarm of beetle-Killiks in a swirling motion. He stayed where he was, refusing to budge as Hapan soldiers all around him fell to the Killiks from below. His red blade emboldened the surviving Hapan forces, and they began to rally, jamming their blaster rifles into the ground and firing until the dirt around their barrels began steaming.
A hole opened up under one of his legs, and he stumbled in surprise.
"Sir!" Ksia threw herself into harm's way, grabbing onto his free hand before the Killik could yank him completely underground.
"Detonator!" Zekk called back, his wet hand slowly slipping from her own.
Ksia detached a thermal detonator from her belt and lobbed it to him. With the Force, Zekk activated it and sent it with lightning speed into the ground. There was a muffled 'boom,' and Zekk was able to pull his leg free. "Thanks, Lieu…" He paused, eyes wide. A Killik staff had stabbed up through the dirt and pushed right through the red-haired Hapan's midsection.
It was at that time that the Hapan counterattack flew into effect, with tunneling mines and mortar shells raining down all around the mesa. Fresh waves of Hapan soldiers poured in from the rear, lobbing explosives into the furrows in the ground made by the burrowing Killik forces.
All that happened in the background though as Zekk carefully lifted Ksia's limp form from the ground. A golden glow surrounded the both as he began to walk with her through the Hapans rushing to the battlefront. It was as if the raindrops themselves couldn't touch her as the Force manifested itself in a protective shell around the impaled recon-marine.
"Medic," he caught the attention of a passing corpsman.
The medic's eyes widened at the state of Ksia. "Sir…there's…nothing I can do for her. That's a fatal…"
"Don't underestimate the Force," Zekk rebuked in a soft voice. "Go find wounded you *can* do something for then. There are many in need of your help."

"Sir," the medic saluted and ran towards the gunfire.
Zekk took one last glance back at the battlefield and saw that the Hapan officers had the situation well in hand, and continued away from the fighting holding his charge. He entered his personal tent and laid the rain-soaked Hapan warrior down on his cot. Her skin was sheet white, her blood soaking the leather jerkin she wore in a growing stain. Clenching his jaw, he sent more of the Force energy into her, and then very carefully sliced off the end of the Killik spear and removed the shaft from her.
Ksia convulsed, spewing up blood and let out a groan of pain. Blood flowed freely from the wound with every heart beat.
"Hang in there," Zekk hissed, hands quickly working a dissolvable bacta patch into the wound to augment his Force-healing. He reached out to grip her hand and found it to be ice cold. "No, come on, warm up."
He carefully peeled the rain-soaked garments from her and removed his own Jedi robes, sliding into the cot with her. Wrapping the blanket around them both, he held her close and closed his eyes in concentration. Resting his forehead against her own, he whispered softly. "These past few days, I've come to care for you greatly. You are going to live, Ksia Thane. It is not your time yet."
The Force shone brightly from the tent, the golden glow cutting through the Zadaria gloom. As the sound of battle died off and the Hapans began to regroup, those nearest the tent looked upon it in awe. They knew a Jedi was at work, doing the impossible once more, and respectfully kept their distance.
"It is not my time thanks to you," Ksia whispered hoarsely after several long minutes, her green gaze flicking upwards to Zekk. She reached up to cup his face with her hands and slowly leaned in for a passionate kiss.

HKUS IV HKUS

"Do they leave the room every time this scene happens?" Ania whispered, gesturing towards where the five-strong Zel contingent of Lilia's bodyguards had disappeared to 'get some refreshments for everyone'.
"Yeah," Lilia sighed, her eyes still glued to the holo. "They have it timed or something so they always come back with refreshments when Zekk goes off to save Taryn and Trista. Shame too, the love scenes are really tastefully done and I think the storyline of lovers that can never be is..."

"Romantic, I know," Ania interrupted. "And does Force healing really work that fast? He had his hand on her wound for what? All of five, ten minutes? If it was fatal…"
"It should have taken him days," Anika Skywalker nodded in agreement. "And Force-healing doesn't make people glow like that."
"If you're going to poke holes in every use of Force this movie has, you're going to have to start taking a journal down. This is a *fictional movie* based on true events," Marasiah said in amusement. "If you didn't notice, the artillery pieces they showed in the opening fight didn't come out until ten years after that battle. And the tanks they were using were GA tanks and not Hapan. Just take it for what it is, good entertainment."
The movie continued in the background with Zekk and a miraculously healed Ksia strengthening their relationship as they oversaw the northern defenses against several unrelenting waves of Killik attacks. Ksia appeared to be invaluable to Zekk as she helped coordinate troop movements and win over soldiers distrustful of following a male leader. While Zekk helped those who disliked Ksia for her last name see that she was a loyal soldier of Hapes. Despite their successes, it was clear that their three companies were not going to be enough to hold their position.
"*Chume'da Taryn and Trista Zel should have returned with intel by now*."
"*I know, Ksia," Zekk murmured, running a hand up and down her bare back as she shared his cot*. "*It's what worries me. They had no backup if something were to go wrong, and I fear Hapan politics will keep them from being found until it is too late.*"
"*Go to them, then, Jedi Knight Zekk. Thank you for these past few weeks, it's made this assignment much more enjoyable than I could have imagined. But we both know we'd never be able to completely satisfy one and other. You need something only the Zels can provide, and I need to return home eventually and reclaim my family's assets. Your place is at their side. I, at least, will have these fond memories to fall back upon if I am every again stranded on a cold and miserable world.*"
Zekk gently cupped her face with one hand. "You are already down one company, Ksia. If the Killiks attack en masse like last time..."
"*I will hold them for as long as you need, Jedi Knight Zekk. I am a Hapan soldier of Recon Gamma at heart. Defeat is not a word I will accept."*

"I thought members of the Dathomir Praxeum were also present for the Battle of Zadaria," Anika asked. "I mean, wasn't Ijun, Hiana Roh's husband, a Dathomiri Jedi?"
"Yup, it's why I can do this," *Jedi'doro* Jaedee Roh floated a pillow in the air and set it down. "Part of the Aros line is Force-sensitive too."
"Really? Who…?"
"Never did figure out which Jedi Colonel Aros snagged," Aros *Jedi'doro,* Sergeant Stella Aros, twin-sister of Jemma, voiced. "She never married and never said who the father of her child was. Always liked to tease grandma that it could have been Jedi Master Zekk. He certainly treated grandma like one his, according to mom and dad."
"And they know better than to say that when Zara and Tyria are in the room," Lilia muttered.
"There is a darker speculation to their lineage," Marasiah said to Anika. "According to historical accounts, during the Legacy War, the members of Alpha Squad were at one time captured by the forces of Abeloth..."
"Marasiah, you are my fellow princess and older than me by over a decade. You've already ticked off the Zels, do you really want the Aros family angry at you too? As far as they are concern Jedi Knight Zekk is the source of their Force-sensitivity. Leave it at that."
"Unless I misread the Hapan historical books, Jedi Knight Zekk is the source of nearly all of the *Jedi'doro*'s Force-sensitivity," Marasiah said wryly. "Yet I bet genetic tests will say differently."
"We're getting off track," Anika piped up, looking slightly intimidated interrupting the two regents. "What happened to the Dathomiri Jedi in the movie?"
"Not Hapan so they didn't make the cut," Zara Zel answered, returning with a tray full of finger-food.
Tyria followed her with an astromech holding a tray of drinks. "Oh good, we're back in time to see Zekk embark on his journey to save Alpha Squad."
"Yes, excellent timing," Lilia deadpanned. "And Anika, the studio that produced this was nervous enough about making a non-Hapan the star of the story. They didn't want to provide a budget for more non-Hapans without a guarantee that the movie would be a success. It's the reason why Knight of Ultimate Body Heat has the Dathomiri and others in it and this one doesn't."
"Shhh," this time it was Tyria Zel. "Movie's going to get really good fast."

HKUS IV HKUS

For many nights and many more days, Zekk trekked through the rugged and untamed landscape of Zadaria. Punishing rainstorms and

howling winds made the arduous journey even more perilous, but still he pressed on. He edged around treacherous mountain passes, waded through waist-high swamps, and sometimes went whole days without rest. The times he did stop, it was only for an hour or so at most, settling into a brief trance underneath a rocky ledge or towering tree. He was like a machine in purpose, pressing onward no matter what obstacle lay in his path.

At one point the wet ground gave way and he slid down a mountainside, tearing his Jedi robes and losing his supply pack. Grimacing, he made a bandage out of what was left of his robes and wrapped up a deep gash in his leg. But even that didn't stop him. The Force, and his love for the Zel twins powered him, and nothing was going to stop him.

It was in his second week of travels that Zekk encountered the first Killik patrols. There were several bipedal insects walking alongside Hapan Joiners in military uniform. He would have let them pass unmolested, but his Force-assisted vision spied something that caused his stomach to clench. One of the Joiners was wielding a 434- heavy blaster pistol that could have only belonged to Taryn Zel. Fortunately, the Joiner was not Taryn, but how the Joiner came into possession of the gun was worrisome.

Lying in wait, Zekk dropped down and in a whirl of motion dispatched the insectoid soldiers with a sweep of his saber. The Joiners brought up their own weapons, but Zekk made a gesture and they were yanked from the Joiner's hands. Another gesture sent all but one of the Joiners flying backwards and into the rocky wall of the mountain. The one remaining Joiner, the one that had had Taryn's gun, stared blankly at Zekk. There was a still silence as Zekk deactivated his lightsaber and slowly turned to face the Joiner.

Zekk summoned Taryn's pistol to his hand and held it up, advancing on the Joiner. Rain dripped from his bare torso and messy black hair as dark green eyes glared at the Joiner. "This gun, where did you get it from?"

"The hive does not take orders from you," the Joiner answered gesturing with the palms of his hands.

Zekk stepped forward and gripped the Joiner by the collar of his shirt. In a gruff, lethal voice, he stared into the black eyes of the Joiner. "I normally wouldn't care, but this time it's personal. I don't know what hive you're from. I don't know what you want on Zadaria. If you're looking to make me a Joiner, I can tell you that I don't have any information that will help you. But what I do have are a very particular set of skills, skills I have acquired in ridding this galaxy of filth that

threaten its peace. If you tell me where you got this gun, where Taryn Zel is, that'll be the end of it. I will not care about your hive, I will not pursue you. But if you don't, I will look for the queen of your hive, I will find that queen, and I will end your hive."
The Joiner held Zekk's furious green eyes with emotionless detachment. "Good luck."
Zekk closed his eyes for a long moment, then opened them. Staring stoically back at the Joiner, he very calmly turned them so that the Joiner's back was to the ledge. "You bring chaos and destruction to the Consortium's steps. You insult the Queen Mother with your very presence and threaten the Hapans with slavery and death. I've considered my next action carefully, unnamed Killik Hive. Perhaps you should have done the same."
"You are a Jedi, you do not execute defenseless people," the Joiner seemed alarmed, showing the first emotion since Zekk had grabbed him. "This is madness."
"Madness?" Zekk raised an eyebrow. "This... is... Hapes."
He kicked the Joiner off the cliff, watching as the hapless man flailed through the air on his way to the mud-soaked ground below. No sooner had the body hit the ground, then the very ground began to shake. Zekk looked up, his face like durasteel as a rush of Killik warriors filled the mountain path ahead. Zekk's lightsaber flared to life and he charged headlong into the ranks of the Killiks. With a dizzying flourish he ended Killik warrior after Killik warrior, a powerful Force-shove sending dozens flying to their doom. His saber was a constant blur as it cleaved through the seemingly endless waves of bodies assailing him. When one of the Killik warriors locked up his saber on the bony staff weapon it wielded, Zekk used Taryn's heavy blaster to blow off its head. Her weapon than sang again in unison with his saber, helping Zekk cut a clear path down the mountainside through the innumerable Killik ranks. The body-count soared, nothing the Killiks threw at Zekk stood a chance.
But then a giant roar echoed through the valley, and a massive shadow soared overhead and landed in the path before Zekk. Standing between the mountain and the end of the path was the largest bipedal Killik Zekk had laid his eyes on. It towered over Zekk by a good meter, a barbed and bladed staff weapon held in its six arms was even taller. The Killik glowered at Zekk and began to spin the staff in a complicated pattern, the cooling evening air rushing towards Zekk with every swirl of the Killik's weapon. If a Killik could sneer, it definitely would have been doing that as it slowly advanced towards Zekk.

Zekk was hardly cowed. Fed up with the Killiks, he calmly raised Taryn's blaster. The Killik warrior stopped where it was. Zekk arched an eyebrow at it. "I know what you're thinking. 'The plasma pistol had a charge enough for fifty shots, did he fire forty-nine or all fifty? Well, to tell you the truth in all this excitement, I kinda lost track myself. But, being this a 434 DeathHammer, one of the most powerful blaster pistols in the galaxy and would blow your head clean off, you've gotta ask yourself one question: 'Do I feel lucky?' Well, do ya, Killik?"
The Killik snarled and took a step forward, its staff swirling again. Zekk pulled the trigger, the Killik hesitated, but no blaster bolt came out.
"Oh, wait," Zekk said mildly, his finger flicking a switch on the gun. "Forgot to hit the safety."
The Killik blinked in surprise then roared and charged towards Zekk. Zekk pulled the trigger again and a single red bolt flew out and caught the massive Killik square in the forehead. Its head snapped back and the Killik staggered several steps. Zekk levitated the massive polearm out of the Killik's hand, and then used the Force to send it rocketing into the giant insect warrior. The weapon embedded itself into the sodden mountainside, the Killik twitching as its vital functions began failing.
"Stick around." Zekk walked away without looking back. There were no other Killiks in sight. With an exhausted sigh, he deactivated his weapons. The fight had taken him to the bottom of the mountain, and night had fallen. Several cuts marred his lean, muscular, rain-drenched torso, but the Zadaria rain washed the blood away as his ragged breath emerged in small clear clouds.
He was just about to relax when he heard the distant sound of explosions and blaster fire. The Force told him that he needed to be at that source, and he needed to be there yesterday. Despite his exhaustion at the non-stop travel and punishing fight with the Killiks, Zekk called upon his energy reserves and took off in a Force-assisted sprint.
The surrounding countryside whipped by him, his booted feet splashing in the muddy ground. The sounds of combat were dying away, and this time, that wasn't a good thing. Did he travel so far, endure so much, only to be too late? He sent a silent prayer to the Force, panting heavily as he pushed his tired and rain-chilled body further past its limits.
Ahead, he saw a small winery village, smoke rising from it in every direction. The closer he got, he could see what looked like a carpet of Killik corpses lying all around the village's perimeter. The blasterfire

had stopped completely, and Zekk's stomach clenched painfully. He stepped around the bodies of the Joiners and Killiks, pausing when he saw someone wearing the uniform of Alpha Squad lying face down in the mud.

He hurried to the soldier's side and carefully turned her over. He didn't know whether to breathe in relief or sorrow when he saw the young features of Corporal Ria Tese. An explosion had eviscerated her insides, making her beyond his help. He moved on, vowing silently to return for her body when he had the chance.

Stoically, Zekk continued to search the village. More Killik corpses, craters from grenades and artillery shells, ruined houses. Several streets over, he found the body of the squad's medic, Lieutenant Lilan Irina. She was barely recognizable, some sort of acid had eaten away at her face and she was only identifiable by her armor and dogtags.

Dread began to build, especially when he found another Alpha Squad commando dead in the doorway of another building, just as mutilated and disfigured as the previous two corpses he had encountered. Three out of twelve dead, Taryn's blaster in the hands of a Joiner. He didn't even want to think about what might have happened to her.

"Come on," he murmured, his face softening slightly as despair began to set in. Searching house by house revealed only more Killik bodies. He heard a blaster discharge in another building and quickly raced towards the sound, stretching his senses out. The Force pulsed in warning and he saw several shadows running alongside him. From the silhouettes, he could tell that these were Killik warriors. His saber activated in a flash, just as two of the shadows veered towards him. His saber was a blur for a second, and two Killik warriors were now in four pieces. The other Killiks moved in. Zekk made a gesture, and a roofing tile flew off and decapitated one Killik. One of the Killiks raised a blaster, and Zekk deflected the bolt back into the shooter.

Leaping out of the streets and onto the rooftops, Zekk saw several more Killiks waiting for him. They swarmed, running rapidly across the tiled surfaces of the roofs with staff-weapons in hand. Zekk kicked off one roof to sail to the top of the next building, saber humming as it sliced in two another Killik en route. Back and forth, they danced across the rooftops in a near silent battle that resulted in Killik body-parts raining down from the sky.

The last Killik fell, and Zekk found himself standing before a building in the center of town, heart thumping loudly in his chest. The Hapans were inside, he knew it.

He entered carefully. There were dead Killiks everywhere, he couldn't avoid stepping on their bodies. Zekk mentally pretended he was

stepping on the good-luck cookies he received with his meal at the dive by the Jedi Temple on Denon.
"That's right, just a whole bunch of cookies," Zekk muttered, the crunching sound under his boot unnerving. He sensed a couple of lifeforms in the building, but couldn't differentiate between Hapan, Joiner, and Killik.
The lifeforms, however, were clustered behind one last, blasterbolt-ridden wooden door. He closed his eyes, preparing for the worst. It was then he heard a voice on the other side of the door.
"One shot left. We had a good run."
"They're not taking me alive. Not going to let them use me against Zekk."
Zekk let out a rush of air at the sound of Taryn's voice. "Taryn!"
"Zekk?" Her voice through the door was incredulous.
"Coming through, don't shoot." Zekk slowly pushed open the door and saw six blood-and-grime covered, exhausted Hapan commandos aiming guns in his direction.
Taryn let out a sound at the back of her throat, throwing her gun to the side and rising to her feet. "You're late."
Zekk smiled sheepishly. "Traffic."
"Not that I'm complaining, but what are you doing here, Wonderknight?" Chiri smiled tightly, wincing as she used her rifle to stand.
"Heard you had a bug-problem, ma'am," Zekk quipped. His smile fell away, however, when he noticed that Trista and several of the others were unaccounted for.
"The bugs have them," Taryn said grimly. She gestured to the other Hapans. "But I couldn't leave the others."
Zekk closed his eyes for several long moments, when he opened them again, he nodded to Taryn. "I just let the Queen Mother know. We have a short-range hopper inbound, it'll be here in the morning."
"I really, really want my own Jedi now," Chiri half whined, pouting almost comically towards Taryn. "*Chume'da*, we've been really, really good bodyguards. You haven't died yet, right? Can we please, please, please have a Jedi for Life Day?"
"Seconded," Hiana Roh voiced. Entering the building behind Zekk with her sniper rifle resting on her shoulder. "They're really handy."
"First things first," Taryn said. She stepped up to Zekk and planted a passionate, steamy, emotion-filled kiss on his lips.
"Still an issue of an entire Killik hive between you two and the others," Lieutenant Lovett breathed out, her midsection swathed in bandages. The other survivors of Alpha Squad that were present were similarly

badly hurt. "And the fact that we can't even move a centimeter in this valley without them knowing."
"Don't worry," Chiri laughed weakly, then groaned and clutched her side. "Maybe we got 'em demoralized."
"We'll think of something," Zekk said. "For now, let's rest up. I do not sense any immediate threat and we'll have a long day ahead of us tomorrow."
"Jedi Knight Zekk," Taryn looked to him, hand held out.
Zekk's expression softened, and he took the hand and allowed Taryn to lead him to a nearby bedroom.
"*Where did Stella, Gemma, and the others Aros Jedi'doro go?*"
"*Same reason the Zels left earlier, Anika. To get snacks for us.*"
"*Things are really that divided?*"
"*You should see the public on the issue. It nicely polarized the nobility at the very least, you're either on Team Zel or Team Thane. What? The nobles have to find <u>something</u> to disagree about. My mom is probably the strongest Queen Mother we've had since the formation of the Consortium, though I'm probably a little biased.*"
"*Just a little.*"
"*Thanks, Marasiah. Anyways, because my mom's so good at politics, even the nobles that disagree with her don't try to kill her. That one attempt that made me like this was from that Mando extremist group.*"
"*Hey, you're missing the scene! Our House granted the director permission to use the original recording Taryn Zel left Zekk on that mission when she thought she was going to die.*"
Despite his tiredness, Zekk could not sleep. His mind was racing, shifting through the various plans needed to rescue the remaining members of Alpha Squad. At his side was his younger lover and anchor in the galaxy, tucked against him and sleeping soundly knowing that he was watching out for her. He knew firsthand the horrors of Joining, had been Joined earlier in the war and knew what it was like to slowly lose your individuality and be fully aware of that at the same time. As strong as Trista and the others were, there was no doubting that they'd succumb to the chemicals employed by the Killiks.
Not wanting to trouble Taryn with his racing heartbeat, Zekk silently slipped out of the bed and dressed. He needed to think of something if he was going to save them without losing anyone in the process. He broodingly made his way to the ruined dining room of the house, staring out a nearby window at the moonless night. Tilting his head towards the heavens, he closed his eyes and made a silent prayer to the Force. He was a Jedi Knight, had served it faithfully for nearly his

entire life. Would the Force grant him this boon and allow him to save those he cared for and loved?
Or would it once again test his devotion by denying him that which he desired most and shatter the family he was finding himself more and more a part of with his every passing day in the Consortium?
He released a ragged breath, his face an emotionless mask as he mentally pleaded with the Force. But as usual, the Force did not respond. Lightly pounding a fist on the window sill, Zekk turned away. It was then he noticed a holoprojector device sitting on the dining-room table. In energy-saving mode, its flickering blue light drew him in like a moth to a flame, and he couldn't help but fully activate the device.
An image of Taryn Zel appeared, her expression one of defeat and exhaustion.
"*This message is intended for General Zekk of the Royal Hapan Army. In the course of a single day, our squad took fifty-percent casualties. Food and medical supplies are low, ammunition nearly depleted. We are not sure how much longer we can hold out. It is likely that you are reviewing this after discovering our bodies. We have uncovered intel that we cannot let the bugs know we have, so if it comes to it, we will take our own lives than become Joiners. Attached is the datafile containing the coordinates the Killik queens most frequent. It is our hope that you finish what we started and take out those bugs. The Hapan Consortium only has enough room for one queen after all.*
The rest of this message is for Jedi Knight Zekk, the personal Jedi of the Noble House Zel." Taryn's mouth twisted into a pained smile, eyes entreating for forgiveness. "*I'm sorry I couldn't make it back, Zekk. Me and Trista really tried, and I really wanted to give you more time, but you know how unfair this galaxy is. Don't…don't blame yourself or think that either of us died loving you any less than we do. I…*"
"Love you," Taryn finished in time with her holographic representation. Zekk jerked in surprise. Wearing a simple nightgown, Taryn slipped her arms around him and shifted herself so that she was standing in front of him. "Lady Zel." He whispered hoarsely, heart aching.
"Shhh…" She planted a soft kiss on his lips. "Pay no mind to that holo. I made it in a moment of weakness, when I had forgotten that my sister and I would always have you to watch over us when we need you the most. You are our personal Jedi, our friend, our protector, our lover. And we are yours for as long as you wish."
"Lady Zel," Zekk said, his voice deep and gruff as he cupped her face with one of his large, calloused hands. "For as long as you want this pauper of a Jedi to remain at your side, I will gladly do so. Thank you so

much for surviving for this long. The galaxy, my life, would be so much darker without you and your sister in it."
Taryn kissed him again. "As would our lives without you. Come back to bed, my Jedi. Stay with me the rest of the night. In the morning, we'll save the others and end this war."
"A tall, order, Lady Zel," Zekk raised an eyebrow, again letting her lead him back to the bedroom. "Impossible even if I were not a Jedi."
"It is a fortunate thing that the Force blesses you with ultimate stamina then," Taryn replied, pulling him to her. "Stay alive tomorrow, Jedi Knight Zekk. That is all I ask."
Zekk pushed on the door, and it slowly swung shut. "For you, Lady Zel, anything."
"*Welcome back, Corporal Aros."*
"*Shove it, Zel."*
"*Your Chume'da orders both of you to shut up and watch the movie."*
"*Yes, Chume'da Lilia."*
The team awoke when the glow of the sun was only just beginning to appear at the very horizon. They took stock of their supplies, of the status of the wounded, and silently made their way out into the cold morning. A fine mist was coming down, dark clouds moving in and threatening to unleash another punishing rainstorm.
Taryn and Zekk led the battered remains of Alpha Squad through the village. A Hapan shuttle flashed through the stormy, near-black clouds above, covering the distance Zekk had traveled in two weeks in a span of a few hours.
"Wait here, we'll secure the area and come back for you," Zekk directed to the wounded.
They nodded bravely, and Lieutenant Lovett said. "Spent this long out here. A few more minutes won't hurt."
The atmospheric hopper made it to the ground with no problem, stopping just outside of the village. Zekk, Taryn, Chiri, and Hiana located the bodies of the fallen Hapan commandos en route to the hopper, and carried them with solemn sadness to the vehicle. Its door was open and a Hapan major greeted the waiting Hapans and Zekk.
"The *Chume* sends her regards."
"Thanks Major Vessau," Zekk said with a nod. The arrivals hefted the bodies onto the vehicle with the major's help.
"Not a trade I'm happy about in any way, but I'll swap you the fallen for these," the major offloaded several crates of weapons and ammunition. "The Chume said you were to embark on a standard Jedi mission and needed some weaponry, so I scrounged up what I could.

You're under orders to rescue the others and avenge the Hapans who fell serving in her name."
"Orders I have no problems following," Taryn said grimly, gently giving one of the fallen commandos one last farewell caress.
"Speaking of weapons. Here, Taryn. Picked this off a Joiner," Zekk hefted her pistol over to her.
Taryn accepted the weapon, smiling faintly. "You're the best."
Chiri gazed at the collection with wide eyes. "Wow! Check it out!" She picked up a weapon that was easily as long as she was tall.
"Independently targeting particle beam phalanx! You could fry half a city with this bad-girl!" Her eyes caught sight of another weapon and she put the long-gun down. "Tactical smart missiles!"
"Phase-plasma pulse rifles," Hiana said, kneeling beside a case of very expensive-looking guns. She tilted her head up towards Vessau. "Experimental stage?"
"I just cleaned out whatever was in the armory," Vessau grinned. "*Chume* gave me highest level clearance. They did come from a heavily secured locker through."
"Radiation-pulse grenades!" Chiri opened another crate. "Electro-sonic leaping mines!"
Vessau gestured broadly. "You've got proton bombs, knives, sharp sticks. The *Chume* said to get you everything you might need, so I did. Gear up."
Zekk and the others quickly divided the spoils as the rain started to come down, and then went to help the wounded towards the med-evac. But just as they were helping the most wounded Hapans from the house, the ground began to vibrate again, the screeches of more Killiks filling the air.
"Damn it!" Zekk whirled to the other Hapans. "Get to the hopper!"
Chiri stepped up next to him, her particle-beam person-sized cannon affixed to her hip with a harness and belt. "I've got you covered Wonderknight."
"You're bleeding," Zekk gestured to the blood-soaked bandage covering one of her muscular arms.
"I ain't got time to bleed," Chiri shook her head.
Zekk saw several projectiles fly through the air. "You have time to duck?"
Chiri yelped as the mortar rounds exploded on the roof of a nearby house after Zekk redirected their path. A sniper round blazed past at some distant target, and Zekk could just make out the bolt punching through five Killiks in a row.

"What are you two still doing here, get out of here!" Taryn yelled as the hopper took off in the background.
"We're supposed to protect you, Lady Zel," Chiri retorted. "Besides, if you get killed, we both lose our chance at getting our own Jedi."
"Zekk's saved your life twice, you really owe him now," Taryn said wryly, a blaster in each hand. "Unless he objects, you can repay him when we get off this planet."
"I'll do my duty to House Zel, no matter how trying it might be," Zekk deadpanned.
"He did save the others too, and we'll be saving your sister and Lieutenant Beyelle."
"He has the Force on his side, he'll survive," Taryn rejoined.
Zekk raised an eyebrow. "The Force definitely does not work like *that*."
Another sniperbolt fizzed through the air, Hiana's way of saying 'I've got dibs' clear to the others.
Zekk sighed and activated his lightsaber, holding a blaster-rifle in his other hand. "For the Jedi, for Hapes."
"For Hapes," Chiri and Taryn stepped forward with them, their weapons at the ready.
A mass of Killik warriors were pouring out of the nearby mountain and streaking across the field in wild abandon.
"Ladies," Zekk inclined his head. "After you."
Taryn and Chiri opened fire. Chiri's assault cannon sending out a blaze of yellow that flattened everything in its path. Taryn's blasters roared to life, planting one head-shot after another as she systematically decimated the opposite flank. From a position behind them, Hiana's sniper rifle began to bark almost non-stop, taking out several targets with every shot. Any projectiles the Killiks sent their way was knocked away by Zekk as his saber became a blurring red shield that protected the two exposed commandos.
Well-stocked with ammo, the Hapans emptied clip and energy pack after clip and pack into the horde, slowly advancing as they did. The Killiks replied with their spears and primitive projectile weapons, but they were no match for the energy-weapons of the Hapans. Chiri's rapid-energy barrage lit the air on fire, and Hiana had temporarily abandoned her sniper-rifle to launch a steady stream of smart-missiles into the attackers with explosive results. Small plumes of fire erupted, the chain-explosions and shockwaves shaking the ground.
Not to be outdone, Taryn advanced with Zekk at her side, taking out anything that had survived the shocking devastation unleashed by the other two commandos. The fight continued on, the seemingly endless Killik horde rushing out from their caves and into the teeth of the

Hapan fireteam. The ground shook, and this time two of the giant beetle creatures appeared. Just as one opened its mouth to roar, a well-timed missile fired by Hiana flew right down its gullet and blew the creature apart. Chiri concentrated her fire on the other, and the second beetle had its face stitched with white-hot plasma that exploded its head after another volley.

Still the Killiks came, still Zekk and the Hapan advanced.

HKUS V HKUS

"The soundtrack, Hapan Survivor, was number one on the charts for several weeks when it came out," Zara said, head bobbing to the upbeat, synthesized tune as Zekk and the Hapan commandos continued to unleash a barrage of devastation on the attacking Killiks.

Girl we need some, girl we need some action
If we're gonna make it like a Hapan survivor
We need some action
If we wanna take our love away from here

The camera angle focused on Zekk, his glistening shirtless form a mask of concentration as he shielded the Hapans from harm. The sun cast a god-like glow on his muscular torso, which was dripping with rainwater and mud. His red saber a constant blur of motion as his precise footwork took him across the muddied ground. A jerk of his head and thrust of his hand and a wave of incoming projectiles were blown away with authority. His rain-soaked pants clung to the well-defined legs of the Jedi Knight, enhancing his musculature and other aspects of his lower-body.

We need a living passion to believe in
Burning hearts and a brand new feeling
Action
If we're gonna make it like a Hapan survivor

"The song is pretty catchy," Ania relented, her eyes flicking back and forth as she followed the battle. A fireball lit up the screen as Hiana's missile barrage flattened another regiment of Killiks. The shockwave buffeted Taryn's mud-slicken braids as she advanced with dual guns blazing. On Zekk's opposite side, Chiri Aros was systematically using her cannon to mow everything down before them. It was pure, pointless, unbelievable action at its finest, and Ania found herself not caring in the slightest.

"See, told you the movie had cool action scenes," Lilia grinned. "The actor who plays Zekk was voted Sexiest Man of Hapes for five years straight. If only I was Marasiah's age, then I'd ask him to be my consort."

"Your mother would never allow that even if you *were* Lady Marasiah's age," Zara said dryly. "Nor would your brother for that matter."
"What would he care?" Lilia waved a hand dismissively. "He's always jetting about in command of the GA's Eighth Fleet. Sometimes I wish he was the one born female. I mean, I came out second and I *still* get to be heir to throne because of my gender, and he gets to have fun all over the galaxy? Not fair at all."
"Right, you're only in line to command the hundreds of star-systems that Hapes controls, a terrible burden" Alema Solo drawled, shaking her head.
"It's only two-hundred and seventy-three star-systems," Lilia corrected her dark-side-inclined cousin in reference to what modern galaxy maps now called the 'Hapan Corridor'—a pie-like sliver of the galactic map that stretched from the Hapan Cluster all the way out into the Outer Rim. "And trying to manage the Outer Rim systems from an insulated nebula in the Inner Rim is a lot more difficult than it sounds. We're lucky we're on friendly terms with the Mandalorian Empire, because if Emperor Sarkin-Tainer ever decides to invade those holdings, we'd never be able to hold on to them."
"Which is why recent events in the Mandalorian Empire must be worrisome," Marasiah said mildly, having personal knowledge of the Mandalorian Empire. Their Empire spanned much of the Outer and Mid Rims, abutting the three other galactic powers in the region—the Hapan Consortium, the Galactic Alliance, and the Fel Empire.
"No kidding," Lilia grumbled. "It's like a perfect storm. First the heir to their throne, Kotep's only child mind you, dies fighting the Mandalorian Protectorate rebellion. Then it's revealed that Kotep himself has an incurable illness and probably won't last another decade. And then three of his top advisors are assassinated by the Protectorate. Mom still won't send the Hapan Navy out there to reinforce our territory though."
"The Praxeum's lessons don't really cover the Mandalorians until next year," Anika said. "Why's the Protectorate trying to kill Kotep and all? Do they want to take over or something?"
"No," Marasiah shook her head. "The Protectorate wants the Mandalorians to return to the more simple times of a century earlier. They believe that the Mandalorians as they are now have entrapped themselves in a cycle of greed and corruption caused by the creation of the Mandalorian Empire."
"But the Mandalorian Empire is almost as large as the Hapan Consortium," Anika said, aghast. "If it fell, then countless worlds are…

"Guys, I'm trying to watch the movie here!" Ania glared at the others. The battle between Zekk, the Hapan commandos, and the Killiks had lasted all day, the sun just beginning its afternoon descent and the rainstorm passing as the last Killik corpse hit the ground. Empty blaster packs were left in a trail behind the Hapans, their weapons glowing. While the cool air caused steam to rise from Zekk's panting form and the setting sun shimmered against his broad chest and well-defined abdominal muscles.

"Lady Zel, lets go save your sister."

HKUS V HKUS

The Killik tunnels were muggy, damp, the walls coated in the hardened secretions of the Killik builders. Guided by the Force, Zekk led the way, his red saber forging a path in the darkness of the cavern. More than once they had to crawl to get through a path or shimmy through narrow crack in between the rock. Chiri even had to leave behind her plasma-phalanx cannon, much to her disgust. But they were determined, nothing was going to keep them from their goal. Despite the absence of any Killiks, they could hear the incessant clicks of the bugs all around them.

The minutes ticked by with aching slowness, their hearts pounding. Their booted feet slid across the rocky ground aware that they were now in the Killik's territory now. The lack of night-vision possessed by the Hapans worked against the commandos, and the red-light of Zekk's lightsaber barely provided enough illumination. But the commandos had trained specifically to counter their inherent biological weakness and refused to let the near-darkness unnerve them.

The narrow passage finally gave way to a massive cavern, beams of afternoon sunlight filtering through cracks high in the ceiling. But the Hapans hardly needed that light. Attached to the ceiling, the floor, the walls, everywhere one could see were mounds of glowing eggs, the purple light they emitted even brighter than the sunlight streaming in.

"Their nest!" Taryn gasped.

"If this is the nest, then where are the guardians?" Chiri frowned.

On cue, several menacing clicking noises sounded behind them, and they looked over their shoulder to see a trio of large bipedal Killiks emerge from the tunnel, barring the way out. Other large Killiks entered through other openings, forming a ring around the cavern. These Killiks were all armed with wicked-looking projectile weapons, and surrounded as the Hapans and Zekk were, it was doubtful that even a Jedi of Zekk's caliber could deflect every shot should the Killiks open fire.

"Me and my big mouth," Chiri grumbled, lowering her assault rifle into position.
"I still have the proton bomb," Hiana voiced, gesturing to the pack on her back.
"Yeah, let's collapse this place once we're out of here, not before," Taryn said wryly.
"What are they waiting for?" Chiri gestured to the Killiks. "They have us surrounded."
"We're in their nest," Zekk murmured, deactivating his lightsaber.
"Yes, and?"
"These are a lot of eggs…who laid them?" Zekk said simply.
The Killik guardians began clicking once more, a massive shape emerging out of one of the larger openings on the opposite side of the cavern.
"The Killik queen," Taryn answered Zekk's rhetorical question.
"Their queen," Zekk nodded. "And she's brought with them her prisoners."
Taryn's head whipped back towards the queen, her gray eyes bulging as she saw her sister and the other Hapan commandos walking calmly with a whole host of Killik warriors. "Trista!"
But her twin didn't respond, didn't acknowledge Taryn in any way, her eyes a midnight black and her face devoid of emotion. Taryn's expression hardened and she held up her own assault rifle and stepped forward, glowering at the Killik queen.
"Get away from her you…" She took a calming breath, but her jaw was still clenched tight and her grip on the rifle firm. "Just return my sister and the others to me, now!"
The Killik queen roared in response, and the hive guardians began to advance. Taryn raised an eyebrow, flicked a switch on her rifle, and sent out a plume of flame at the nearest cluster of eggs. The queen roared again, this time with a hint of fear, and the hive guardians stopped where they were.
"We have an understanding," Taryn glared. "Give me my sister and the others and we'll leave your nest alone."
"We do not wish to go, Taryn," Trista voiced. "We have heard the starsong and enjoy the peace given to us by the Kind."
"Come on, Lady Zel!" Chiri interrupted. "You're going to side with the Killiks and pass up Wonderknight?"
Zekk glanced sidelong at Chiri. "I'm not sure that I would be a proper antidote for Joiners."
"Heck, once people join with you, they won't need bugs to help them feel warm and fuzzy," Chiri muttered back.

"The Kind gives me peace," Trista said, though she sounded conflicted. "Jedi Knight Zekk can Join with us and help give safety and security to the Kind."
"We agreed to only share him with Alpha Squad," Taryn replied darkly. "And the only royalty that will get to touch him is me and you. No other deranged relatives of ours, and certainly not a giant bug queen."
"Five minutes," Hiana almost whispered.
"Five minutes?" Zekk looked to her as Taryn tried to reason with the Killik queen and her sister.
"Proton bomb detonation," Hiana nodded, tilting her head to where she had let the large-yield explosive device roll. It was hidden almost perfectly at the base of a large cluster of eggs, the light of the eggs keeping the device's blinking lights from standing out.
"We don't even have a way out yet," Zekk whispered back.
"Ooops," Hiana glanced at the bomb. "No disarm switch."
"What?"
"Bomb wasn't Hapan. Said something about being Ascendancy-made," Hiana said thoughtfully. "Why would a people create a bomb with no off-switch?"
"It's what the Chiss do," Zekk shook his head, eyes darting about the room. As he scanned the area with the Force, a plan slowly started to formulate in his mind. "Okay, I have an idea, but it's crazy."
"Four-minutes, twenty-seconds," Hiana answered.
"Not helping," Chiri glared at the sniper.
"No, it's okay, we want the bomb to go off," Zekk said. "All we have to do is get Taryn and Trista and the other Alpha Squad Joiners to where we are."
"But we'll still be in this cave when the bomb goes off?" Chiri asked. "A bomb that can level an entire city block."
"Yeah. I thought I was clear about that."
"I think we need a new plan," Chiri muttered.
"Seconded," Hiana nodded fervently.
"In theory, what I have planned should work," Zekk said.
Taryn, who had listened to the conversation, looked back to the Killik queen. "Fine, Zekk and myself and the others will Join. But we want our former comrades-in-arms to be the ones to do it. Have Trista, Kiali, and Kona come over here. No tricks. We don't have the firepower or numbers to beat you here."
The Killik queen let out a low hiss, and the Joined members of Alpha Squad made their way sedately through the field of glowing eggs.
"Two-minutes, ten seconds," Hiana reported.
"They're taking their sweet time," Chiri said nervously.

"Let's go meet them half way." Taryn whispered, eyes on her sister.
"Have to be here at the epicenter," Zekk shook his head.
"I really hate your plan," Chiri hissed. "What sort of crazy person would voluntarily stay in a mountain about to be reduced to a pile of pebbles?"
"House Zel's Jedi," Hiana shrugged. "At least I'll die in good company."
"Really wish you'd have more faith in me," Zekk said wryly.
"Fifty-seconds left," Hiana arched an eyebrow in turn. The Joiners were still several meters away, but closing.
"Hell, I am not going to die without paying off some of my debt, Lady Zel, your permission?"
"Go ahead," Taryn said, amusement quirking her lips despite the situation.
Before Zekk could ask what they were talking about, Chiri stepped up to him and gave him a smoking hot, lip-sealing, breath-stealing, tongue flirting kiss.
"You do realize that for the plan to work I have to clear my mind and concentrate," Zekk breathed out against her lips.
"I just got us all killed, didn't I?" Chiri managed, panting.
"Twenty seconds."
"Only if your kiss was memorable," Taryn said worriedly.
"I can't win either way," Zekk grumbled, but began to build up the Force around him. "It was either memorable and the answer is 'yes.' Or forgettable and you'll castrate me later because we'll still be alive."
The Joiners arrived.
"Ten."
"Are you ready to become one with the Kind?" Trista said peacefully.
"Going to have to wait," Taryn grabbed her sister into a tight hug, with Hiana and Chiri performing similar acts with the other two. For his part, Zekk held out his hands towards the bomb and concentrated.
A split second later, the proton bomb went off in a blinding flash. But rather than complete annihilation of everyone and everything in the room, it was as if time suddenly stood still. It only lasted for a moment, and when time returned to its normal flow, everyone watched in complete shock as a silent funnel of destructive energy shot upwards and into the top of the cavern. But once it hit the top, everything changed. Freed from the corridor of Force-energy that restricted its movements, the full force of the proton-bomb-turned-shaped-charge ripped through the top of the mountain and literally blew its top off in a deafening, ground-shaking, eardrum bursting kaboom. The sound was heard for kilometers away. Those on the frontlines and in the base-

camp looked up in alarm and were treated to the view of a pillar of white fire rising up out of one of the distant mountain peaks. Boulder-sized debris rained down all around, crashing down like thunder and smashing eggs and Killiks alike. The queen, the largest creature in the room, was smashed flat by careening pieces of rock. The hive guardians, going berserk at the chaos, were likewise squashed or cut down in their tracks. The sun shone brightly through the cloud of dust and debris, revealing the Killik nest as it was simultaneously destroyed.

The large shards of rock continued to rain down long after the shockwave had passed, the rumble of each boulder hitting echoing loudly in the mountain-range.

As the dust began to settle and the last of the mountain finished raining down in a fine mist of gravel and dust, there was no sign of the Hapans, or of Zekk.

"*I thought the suicide plan with Zekk and the mountain didn't occur until Ilum."*

"Like I said, Anika, the director wasn't sure he'd get the funding for a sequel because of the non-Hapan character in the lead role so he went all-out. Big explosions always appeal to the crowd."

"Then what do they do in the sequel?"

"Well, this movie blew up one mountain. In Ultimate Body Heat, they blow up an entire mountain range. In Ultimate Sacrifice they mimic what happened in history and blow up an entire starsystem."

"The director and writer aren't too original then. I mean, how many times can you have an impressive explosion as the solution before it gets old? It's almost like they back themselves into a corner writing some extra-challenging situation for their characters to get out of, and don't have the brain power to think of a way out besides blowing the problem up."

"No one asked you, Ania."

"Besides, there really is a Zekk Zel crater on Zadaria now," Zara spoke up. "It was created in the Legacy War though, but who cares."

"I care if you guys don't shut up, I'm trying to watch the movie."

"I thought you said it wasn't original."

"The first one is always better than the sequels. The sequels are just the studio's way of milking the most money out of a franchise as possible. Now quiet, I want to see where the unoriginal director takes this story."

"General Zekk! Lady Zel! Can you hear us?" The rescue hoppers hovered over the massive crater the explosion had created. The two-dozen hoppers continued their grid-by-grid search, their searchlights

sweeping the area fervently as daylight began to once more shine in the distance. "General Zekk, Lady Zel?"
"Look! Down there! I've got movement!" One of the search craft spotters called out.
Several rescue hoppers quickly descended, emergency workers piling out as the searchlights highlighted the shifting pile of rubble. Among them were the members of Alpha Squad who had been exfiltrated earlier and had returned to duty after a hasty bacta session. They began scrambling at the rock-covered ground, removing slab after slab of rock as their determination to rescue the others shown on their sweat-covered faces.
One last particularly large slab was pushed aside, and a gray-dirt-covered Chiri Aros was the first one through the hole. Apart from a dried head wound, she was unscathed and smiling at the rescuers. "Hey, thanks for stopping by."
Hiana was up next, her sniper rifle strapped to her back and bearing a major dent in the mid-section. The other members of Alpha Squad likewise piled out. It was clear from their normal eye-color that even those who had been Joined had been freed of the Killik influence. And it was obvious, if the missing top-half of the mountain didn't give it away, that Jedi magic had played a major factor in that. As the tension over the fate of the royal Zels began to mount, Trista Zel emerged from the hole in the debris layer, accepting both Hiana and Chiri's help in pulling her to the surface. When Taryn Zel emerged next, the rescuers began to cheer and clap in relief. And when a dust-covered, shirtless Zekk emerged last, the cheering increased in volume.
One rescuer in particular looked relieved as she disengaged herself from the rest of the crowd.
"Ksia Thane," Zekk smiled. "Good to see you again. How goes the war?"
Ksia smiled a lopsided smirk. "We have the buggers on the run. This was a lynchpin in their defensive network, and with it completely obliterated, their lines have been collapsing one after another."
"That's great news," Zekk laughed, embracing her. Her eyes widened in surprise and shot a nervous look over to Taryn.
For her part, Taryn saw the embrace, glanced back and forth between the two, and smiled ruefully. She stepped up to the both of them. "Thanks for keeping him alive while we were away," Taryn said to Ksia as the cheering continued to echo all around them.
"It was my pleasure, Lady Zel," Ksia swallowed. "Should I pack my bags for somewhere remote and desolate to live out the rest of my life?"
Taryn blinked, then looked to Zekk. "Was *she* memorable?"

"Yes," Zekk answered simply, causing Ksia to cringe.
Taryn shrugged at her expression. "We'll keep you around then, Duch'da Thane. Anyone impressive enough to earn House Zel's Jedi's admiration is someone we want to keep around to keep him safe. In fact, I think this is the start of a beautiful friendship."
"Thank you, I promise you won't regret it," Ksia exhaled in relief.
"So what's next?" Zekk leaned down to whisper to Taryn.
"We clean up, get some rest. Plenty of rest," Taryn muttered back as they climbed into one of the rescue choppers. She then gestured to the rest of Alpha Squad. Though three had died on the mission, there were still nine of them operational. "Because Alpha Squad *always* pays our debts."
Zekk strapped himself in and gazed at the other commandos as they all eyed him. "Can I accept payments in installments?"
"You may," Taryn leaned forward in her seat's harness. "I'll put down a deposit right now."
Zekk cupped her face and the two passionately kissed as the hopper took off and headed towards the setting sun.

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The movie faded to black as its rousing theme song took over. Some in the room clapped for the fun of it, cheering as the credits began scrolling across the screen. Ania rubbed at her eyes and winced as she got to her feet. Though she had enjoyed the movie a lot more than she would like to admit, the last thing she wanted to do was let the Hapans know their tastes in films wasn't all that bad. She definitely gave the film points for entertainment value, but the lack of original plot and character development had her feeling that something was missing. She wouldn't say she was disappointed, but at the same time, she wondered how such a mediocre movie could have such a wide following.
Oh well, Ania chuckled softly to herself. She figured it was probably safer for her sanity if she stopped trying to figure the Hapans out. If they liked bad sci-fi movies, who was she to judge.
"Wasn't that movie great!?" Lilia Grace Chume Djo beamed to her relatives. "I told you it had amazing and romantic action sequences!"
Ania nodded. Making Lilia Grace Chume Djo sad was too much like kicking an Ewok pup—beyond cruel and unusual. "It was fun to watch, I'll give you that."
"Yeah, it was a real blast," Alema nodded distracted, but her eyes darted to her communicator as it chimed and those Force-sensitive could sense the shift in her emotions.
"Alema?" Marasiah said evenly.

The blond-haired Jedi shook her head. "Sorry gals, got to go. Big-Dark-and-Greedy is making his move."
"Want some backup?" Lilia asked.
Alema Solo's mouth twisted into a thin smile and she shook her head. She closed her eyes and focused for a moment, and everyone felt the icy logical nature of Alema Ren fall into place. She headed for the door, her lightsaber flying into her hand and spinning about. "No offense, Chume. You'll just get in the way. Besides, I don't need your help. Big-Dark-and-Greedy is so going to get it for ruining this day. Out of all the days to stage a coup, he had to choose today."
"I meant I was going to send Zar or one of the others with you," Lilia whispered softly, looking away.
"Well, that killed the mood," Zara Zel sighed as the doors closed behind Alema and left an awkward silence behind.
Ania looked over at Lilia and saw the forlorn expression on her face. She mentally cursed her dark side cousin and walked over to Lilia's lounger. "Hey, I don't have anything planned for today. Are the other movies in the series any good?"
Lilia looked at Ania with wide eyes, then looked away. "You don't have to stay on my account. I know you don't think much of the series and I don't want your pity. Being Force-sensitive sucks sometimes."
"Yeah, it does," Ania said, making a face and trying to think of her next words so the living lie-detector in front of her wouldn't call her on them. "But really, I'm up to having an Ultimate marathon if the rest of you girls are too?"
"I'm curious how they portray the rest of the Swarm War," Anika brightened, still hugging the giant pillow to her.
"My adoring masses in the Empire can wait," Marasiah agreed.
As the others agreed, Lilia's smile returned. She activated her hover-chair and the floating seat took her legless form over to the movie shelf. "It had a budget that was three-times bigger than the first one. It was even filmed on Illum, and the same hive that helped with the first movie signed up for this one too!"
Ania settled back into the plush couch and chuckled softly as Lilia continued to explain various trivia about the movie.
Yup, this was her family, princesses, dark Jedi, Jedi, soldiers, and all. And she wouldn't trade it for the whole galaxy.
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